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### **The Nembutsu as the inclusive and universal path for ordinary people -an essential approach for propagation based on "*Meditation Sutra on Amida*"**

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#### **1. Introduction:**

In the western world, Buddhism is generally associated with meditation. When first time visitors come to the temple, 7 out of 10 comment that they are interested in meditation. Sixty percent of telephone calls to the temple ask about meditation. When invited to interfaith meetings, people expect to lead meditation from the Buddhists.

The English word "meditation" has a broad meaning. According to the *Webster's New World Dictionary*, the word "meditation" originally comes from "med-" or "me-" which means to measure physically as well as mentally, that is, to measure, to consider, to understand, (a wise counselor, doctor). In fact, "mita" in A-mid(t)a, and para-mita shares the same origin in etymology with the word "meditation." Meditation is the act of meditating<sup>1</sup>; deep and continued thought; or deep reflection.

An internet search for "meditation" will yield a list of many Buddhist temples and organizations, as well as yoga, Christianity, Judaism, and spirituality, etc. Let me list several examples; Shamatha Meditation, Vipassana Meditation, Transcendental Meditation, Seated Meditation, Sitting Meditation, Walking Meditation, Silent Meditation. The Shin Buddhist Service Book <sup>2</sup> of the Buddhist Churches of America contains sections on meditation (Mokuso) in the service format and meditation readings for both adults and children.

Some Shin Buddhist scholars and ministers seem to associate the word "meditation" specifically with Zen or Zazen<sup>3</sup>. Maybe it was true at one time when the western people knew only Zen as a Buddhist form. However, since now various kinds of Buddhism are known by the general public, such as Tibetan Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism, the word "meditation" is used as more inclusively and has a broader meaning these days. In this sense, the Nembutsu could be described as a form of meditation.

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<sup>1</sup> "Meditate" means to think deeply and continuously, to ponder, to reflect.

<sup>2</sup> Published by Buddhist Churches of America in 1994, Revised and edited by Department of Buddhist Education

<sup>3</sup> Since the word Zen came from Sanskrit term 'dyana', Zen was also translated as meditation. Zazen is translated as sitting or seated meditation.

"Nembutsu" can be translated as "to meditate on the Buddha. The "word "meditate" can be used as a synonym of Shinjin, as in thinking deeply (as Deep Mind) and continuously (as the Mind which continues). The ultimate form of meditation, according to the context of the *Meditation Sutra*, is saying the Name of the Buddha, since the *Meditation Sutra* concluded<sup>4</sup> with the Buddha saying to Ananda, "You must hold firmly to these words. To hold to these words is to hold to the Name of the Buddha of immeasurable life."

Shan-tao commented<sup>5</sup> on this phrase, revealing, "Although the advantages of the two gateways of meditative and nonmeditative practices have been taught up to this point, in view of the intent of the Buddha's Primal Vow, this is to bring sentient beings solely to wholehearted utterance of the Name of Amida Buddha." In this way, saying the Nembutsu is the ultimate form of meditation in the *Meditation Sutra*. The *Smaller Sukhavativyuha Sutra* expresses how one can hold the Name of the Buddha, which is to constantly saying the Nembutsu single-heartedly. All different types of meditation as well as nonmeditative forms can serve as a guide to saying the Name constantly, which can be called, "Nembutsu Meditation."

## 2. Shinran Shonin's view on the *Meditation Sutra*

As a way of propagating Shin Buddhism, approaching the Nembutsu as meditation, I believe, would be more appropriate in the western countries. The system of the *Meditation (Contemplation) Sutra on Amida Buddha* can suggest to us various ways to introduce Buddhism and guide people to the Nembutsu-Dharma through meditative forms as skillful means of kindness.

Now, I would like to introduce how Shinran Shonin sees the *Meditation Sutra* with relation to the *Larger Sutra* and *Smaller Sutra*.

### (1) view on three sutras

Shinran Shonin views the *Larger Sutra*<sup>6</sup>, *Meditation Sutra*<sup>7</sup> and *Smaller Sutra*<sup>8</sup> as respectively corresponding to the 18<sup>th</sup> Vow<sup>9</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> Vow<sup>10</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Because of this phrase, the *Meditation Sutra*'s real intent is to reveal the Nembutsu of Amida's Vow. This phrase is quoted by Shinran in the Volume of *Transformed Bodies and Lands*, *Kyogyosho-Monrui*, C.W.S. page 230

<sup>5</sup> The *Commentary on the Meditation Sutra*, quoted in the Volume of the *Transformed Bodies and Lands*, *Kyogyosho-Monrui* C.W.S. page 232

<sup>6</sup> The *Larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra* begins with the question of Ananda who had recognized the different appearance of Shakyamuni Buddha. Then, the Buddha gives a discourse of the Forty-eight Vows established by the Dharmakara Bodhisattva through profound thoughts and eternal practices. The Dharmakara Bodhisattva fulfills the Vows and becomes the Buddha of Immeasurable Light and Life (Amida). Shakyamuni Buddha tells the Maitreya Bodhisattva that

Vow<sup>11</sup> of Amida's Forty-eight Vows.<sup>12</sup> Shinran understands that the common feature among the three Pure Land Sutras is the truth of the Primal Vow of Amida. In other words, the working of Amida's Vow is the essence of the three sutras. Differences among the three are in their explicit forms. Each one has its unique way of presenting the great working of Amida's Vow.<sup>13</sup>

The process of three sutras that Shinran Shonin expresses is the 19<sup>th</sup> Vow or *Meditation Sutra*, 20<sup>th</sup> Vow or *Smaller Sutra*, and 18<sup>th</sup> Vow or *Larger Sutra*. This process is very practical for those who start to learn the Nembutsu teachings. Through this process various meditative and non-meditative practices guide one to the Nembutsu practice as saying the Name of the Buddha. Then, saying the Nembutsu guides one to the ocean of

this teaching of Amida Buddha (Nembutsu) remains forever even though most of the other teachings of the Buddha may decay.

<sup>7</sup> The *Meditation Sutra on Amida* begins with the tragedy that happened at Rajagrha castle in India. Queen Vaidehi is imprisoned by her son, Ajatasatru, and requests the Buddha's disciples (Mogallana and Ananda) to help her. Then Shakyamuni Buddha appears before her with the disciples. Shakyamuni Buddha shows her the meditative practices of the thirteen stages to attain the Land of Amida Buddha and non-meditative practices of three virtues with nine kinds of birth. In the conclusion, Shakyamuni Buddha emphasizes the importance of keeping the Name of Amida Buddha (Nembutsu) as the way to reach the Pure Land.

<sup>8</sup> The *Smaller Sukhavatīvyūha Sutra* begins when the Buddha asks a question to Shariputra, and then Buddha himself gives the answer. In this sutra, the Buddha calls Shariputra's name fifty-three times yet, Shariputra never says anything throughout the entire sutra. It is the Buddha's discourse about the Amida Buddha and Pure Land. It emphasizes single-mindedly saying the Name of Amida Buddha, which is praised by all Buddhas in the universe. It also expresses the rarity of attaining the true entrusting to Amida's Vow.

<sup>9</sup> If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, with sincere mind entrusting themselves, aspiring to be born in my land, and saying my Name perhaps even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma. (18<sup>th</sup> Vow)

<sup>10</sup> If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters - awakening the mind of enlightenment and performing meritorious acts - should aspire with sincere mind and desire to be born in my land, and yet I should not appear before them at the moment of death surrounded by a host of sages, may I attain the supreme enlightenment. (19<sup>th</sup> Vow)

<sup>11</sup> If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, on hearing my Name, should place their thoughts on my land, cultivate the root of all virtues, and direct their merits with sincere mind desiring to be born in my land, and yet not ultimately attain it, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. (20<sup>th</sup> Vow)

<sup>12</sup> Many discussions on this matter by Shinran are found in the chapter of Transformed Buddha-bodies and Lands of "Kyogyosho Monrui. (Collected Works of Shinran, page 207-240)

<sup>13</sup> "According to the *Larger Sutra*, true and provisional Vows were established. Further, in the *Meditation Sutra*, provisional and true teachings are revealed. In the *Smaller Sutra*, only the "true" gate is taught, and provisional good acts are not discussed. Thus, what is true in the three sutras has as its essence the selected Primal Vow. What is provisional in the three sutras is essentially the practice of various roots of good." (Volume of *Transformed Bodies and Lands*, *Kyogyosho-Monrui*, Collected Works of Shinran page 220)

Shinjin or true entrusting of the Amida's Vow. It can mean that without the various practices of the 19<sup>th</sup> Vow and the Nembutsu practice of the 20<sup>th</sup> Vow, Shinran would have never understood Amida's Power of benefiting others or Tariki. This process is clearly seen in Shinran's life experiences, in which he encountered the Universal Vow of Amida Buddha through his master Honen.

Shinran Shonin experienced various meditative and non-meditative practices in Mount Hiei (19<sup>th</sup> Vow), which led him to Yokawa where he practiced Nembutsu Samadhi (20<sup>th</sup> Vow). Then, Shinran met Master Honen who introduced the Selected Vow of Amida (18<sup>th</sup> Vow). Shinran felt the profound Compassion and Wisdom of Amida who prepared the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> vows as skillful means to lead him to the ocean of the 18<sup>th</sup> Vow<sup>14</sup>.

## **(2) Shinran's view on the *Meditation Sutra* or 19<sup>th</sup> Vow**

Shinran sees the *Meditation Sutra* in two ways: One is the "essential" gate of various practices. This is an explicit and provisional<sup>15</sup> teaching of meditative and non-meditative practices. The other is the gate of the Universal Vow. This is implicit and true teachings of the Nembutsu practice of Amida's Vow.

Shinran's view of the Provisional or Essential teachings is to encourage and guide self-power practitioners to enter the Primal Vow<sup>16</sup>. All meditative

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<sup>14</sup> Thus I, Gutoku Shinran, disciple of Shakyamuni, through reverently accepting the exposition of [Vasubandhu,] author of the Treatise, and depending on the guidance of Master [Shan-tao], departed everlastingly from the temporary gate of the myriad practices and various good acts and left forever the birth attained beneath the twin sala trees. Turning about, I entered the "true" gate of the root of good and the root of virtue, and wholeheartedly awakened the mind leading to the birth that is noncomprehensible. Nevertheless, I have now decisively departed from the "true" gate of provisional means and, [my self-power] overturned, have entered the ocean of the selected Vow. Having swiftly become free of the mind leading to the birth that is noncomprehensible, I am assured of attaining the birth that is inconceivable. How truly profound in intent is the Vow that beings ultimately attain birth! Having entered forever the ocean of the Vow, I now realize deeply the Buddha's benevolence. To respond with gratitude for the supreme virtues, I collect the crucial passages expressing the true essence of the Pure Land Way, constantly saying, out of mindfulness [the Name that is] the inconceivable ocean of virtues. Ever more greatly rejoicing, I humbly receive it. (Volume of *Transformed Bodies and Lands*, *Kyogyosho-Monrui*, Collected works of Shinran, Page 240)

<sup>15</sup> The term "provisional" refers to those of the Path of Sages and those of the meditative and non-meditative practices within the Pure Land path. (Volume of *True Entrusting*, *Kyogyosho-Monrui*, C.W.S. page 124)

<sup>16</sup> The eighty-four thousand dharma-gates are all good practices of the provisional means of the Pure Land teaching; they are known as the "essential" or provisional gate. This gate consists of the good practices, meditative and non-meditative, taught in the Sutra of Meditation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life. Meditative good refers to the thirteen

and non-meditative practices nurture people to enter the Primal Vow of Amida. The word "provisional" or "temporary" is used in an affirmative way in Shinran's definition. Provisional ways are the ones that bring self-power practitioners to the Amida's Power of benefiting others. In other words, no Buddhist practices are separate from Amida's Universal Vow.

Shinran Shonin expresses his view in various places in his writing that meditative and non-meditative practices are skillful means to support and encourage the practice of the Nembutsu. Let me quote a couple of Wasans on the 19<sup>th</sup> Vow:

Provisionally guiding sentient beings of the ten quarters with the words,  
 "Aspire with sincere mind and desire to be born,"  
 Amida revealed the temporary gate of various good acts  
 And vowed to appear before them (at the time of death).  
 (*Jodo Wasan* #61 about 19<sup>th</sup> Vow, C.W.S. page 341)

This Wasan (#61) expresses the view that Amida reveals the temporary gate in order to guide sentient beings.

Based on Amida's Vow to appear at the time of death,  
 Shakyamuni presented all the various good acts  
 In one scripture, the *Meditation Sutra*,  
 To encourage those who perform meditative and nonmeditative practices.  
 (*Jodo Wasan* #62 about 19<sup>th</sup> Vow, C.W.S. page 342)

This Wasan reveals that Shakyamuni Buddha talked about *Meditation Sutra* for encouragement for practitioners.

All the good acts and myriad practices,  
 Because they are performed with a sincere mind and aspiration,  
 Become, without exception, provisional good  
 That will lead to birth in the Pure Land.  
 (*Jodo Wasan* #63 about 19<sup>th</sup> Vow, C.W.S. page 342)

This Wasan explains that sincere mind and aspiration cultivated through good acts and practices will lead to the attainment of Birth.

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contemplations; non-meditative good refers to the good acts of the three types of meritorious behavior and the nine grades of beings. These all belong to the "essential" gate, which is the provisional means of the Pure Land teaching; it is also called the provisional gate. Encouraging and guiding all sentient beings with various means through this "essential" or provisional gate, the Buddha teaches and encourages them to enter "the great treasure ocean of true and real virtue -the Primal Vow, perfect and unhindered, which is the One Vehicle." Hence, all good acts of self-power are called provisional ways. (*Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling*, C.W.S. page 485-6)

In this way, Shinran Shonin's attitude toward the meditative and non-meditative practices is inclusive, recognizing the profound thoughts of the Buddha's Vow. All different kinds of practices nurture the practitioners to the Nembutsu. This inclusive attitude of Shinran needs to be examined in the context of practices, especially in the western world when we engage in propagation. With this understanding of Shinran's inclusiveness toward various practices, let me examine the characteristics of the *Meditation Sutra*.

#### **4. Characteristics/Uniqueness of “*Meditation Sutra on Amida*”**

In the *Meditation Sutra*, meditative practices and non-meditative practices constitute a process that leads ordinary people to the Nembutsu teaching. I believe that the *Meditation Sutra* develops the model that any practices can lead to the Nembutsu teachings. In other words, the Nembutsu embraces various practices. The uniqueness of the *Meditation Sutra* is indeed skillful means of the Buddha for us to realize the Nembutsu-Dharma.

##### **(1) The Buddha is talking to a lay woman named Vaidehi.**

It is always important to realize to whom the Buddha is talking. One of the most important characteristics of Buddha's discourses is that he always gives his teaching in accordance with the capacities of the person to whom he talks.

Queen Vaidehi is in a very unique situation in that she is a lay female person, not a monk who renounced the world. She seeks the guidance of the Buddha to overcome her suffering and pain. Queen Vaidehi was imprisoned by her son, Ajatasatru, the prince of the Rajagrhasthane castle. Her husband king Bimbisara was also imprisoned without any food and drinks by his son as well. She really needs help to overcome such suffering in her mind and body. Her suffering and anguish can represent our own suffering.

When we are looking for the dharma, we are somewhat like Vaidehi. It may be the same whether it is in the east or west. Buddhism is especially very new to people in the west. Western people may look for spiritual comfort, peace and fulfillment in the Buddhist teachings but not necessarily know how they can go about it.

The *Meditation Sutra* is taught by the Buddha for a Vaidehi-like person, or simply ordinary people. How the Buddha guides Vaidehi is the way we can guide people to the Nembutsu teaching.

##### **(2) Inclusive approach to the Nembutsu teachings**

The *Meditation Sutra* can include meditative and non-meditative practices, which means that this sutra has a capacity to endure and guide

various practitioners to the Nembutsu teaching. People can start to learn the Nembutsu-Dharma from any level they are at. The Nembutsu in essence embraces various practices of Buddhism.

This inclusive characteristic of the *Meditation Sutra* is very skillful and kind for the people who are not familiar with the Nembutsu or Buddha-Dharma. The *Meditation Sutra* gives a ladder for beginners to calm down the mind to visualize the realm of the Buddhahood of thirteen meditations, showing nine levels of birth, and being guided to saying the Nembutsu. This step-by-step approach is applicable to propagate the Nembutsu teaching in the west.

### **(3) Experiential and practical approach**

The *Meditation Sutra* began its story from the tragedy at the Rajagṛha which had a strong impact and urgent necessity based on the real life experiences of Vaidehi. Then, Shakyamuni Buddha gives her various forms of practice to engage in. At the conclusion, the Nembutsu-Dharma transforms her suffering into virtues and she gains happiness and peace with joy. According to western philosophy, the westerners tend to be practical and action-oriented people. The *Meditation Sutra* is also very practical and action-oriented. It is practical in the sense that Vaidehi becomes free from suffering and pain. Simply, the problems that she experienced are solved in the end. It is action-oriented in the sense that her freedom is achieved through various meditative and non-meditative practices. Her actions, guided by the Buddha, lead to the conclusion of the Nembutsu-Dharma. The *Meditation Sutra* is a down-to-earth type of teaching.

This step-by-step, practical and experiential approach should be able to apply to how an ordinary person enters the Ocean of Amida's Vow. When we consider the skillful means of the Buddha, we need to utilize these steps for guiding people to the path of the Nembutsu. Especially, in the western countries where Buddhism has newly planted, these steps would guide the people who have not been fully exposed to Buddhist culture and traditions. It is the act of kindness to present some patterns that they will be able to follow. Needless to say, this pattern is not something that everyone has to follow, yet it should help newcomers learn the path of the Nembutsu.

## **5. Implementing the meditative approach**

To talk about the theories and principles is one thing and to actually do it is another. As a conclusion, I would like to share my limited experience in utilizing the steps at the New York Buddhist Temple.

In services, retreats, meditation classes and various dharma gatherings, I try to emulate the pattern of the *Meditation Sutra*:

(1) We begin with silent meditation to settle down the mind like the way Vaidehi became calm after she appealed to the Buddha. We sit either on the chair or floor, sometimes with Lotus position<sup>17</sup> like the way Honen Shonin, Shinran Shonin and Rennyo Shonin sat. Silent meditation lasts from a minimum of 5-10 minutes to a maximum of 30-45 minutes, depending upon the occasion.

(2) Following the silent meditation, we chant the sutra as receiving the Dharma, which is the part of Shakyamuni's teachings in the *Meditation Sutra*. We include English chanting<sup>18</sup> to convey the meaning of the sutra.

(3) Chanting is followed by the Nembutsu Meditation or saying the Nembutsu "na mo a mi da bu"<sup>19</sup> as the teachings and practices that guide persons to the Nembutsu in the *Sutra*. We recite the Nembutsu as many as 108 times<sup>20</sup>. Unless one is born in the temple family or a devoted Nembutsu family, the word "namoamidabu" is very foreign. By saying it many times<sup>21</sup>, the Nembutsu becomes a natural expression.

(4) Following the Nembutsu Meditation, we finish with Eko-Merit Transference to share the benefit with others, as the way that sutras end with sharing the merit-virtues. We sometimes use "Metta Meditation" to extend loving kindness to all the beings.

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<sup>17</sup> Shan-tao explains how one meditate in his *Dharma- Gate of Meditation and Contemplation*. (SSZ-I, page 618)

<sup>18</sup> We use English *Prajna Paramita Sutra* (Heart Sutra) to convey the message of the basic principles of Mahayana Buddhism. According to Shinran Shonin, Nagarjuna wrote a commentary on Prajna Sutra and others to encourage us to the Pure Land:

" Our teacher, Bodhisattva Nagarjuna, abundantly praises the Pure Land in the west  
In such works as his commentaries on the *Mahaprajna Paramita Sutra*  
And the *Ten Bodhisattva Stages*,  
And urges us to practice the Nembutsu."

(*Koso Wasan* on Nagarjuna #1, C.W.S. page 361)

<sup>19</sup> The reason why I use "na mo a mi da bu" is 1) the six syllables can correspond to the six Chinese characters of the Name; 2) you can guess the meaning through association with the phrase you read in books etc written as "Namu Amida Butsu" 3) You can chant smoothly and continuously (three beats).

<sup>20</sup> *Jitsugo's Notes* says "one needs to chant the Nembutsu a hundred times in a morning service everyday, following the tradition of gratitude." (SSZ-III pag 917)

<sup>21</sup> Whether one says with self-power or through Amida's benefiting-other Power, we need to encourage to say the Name. Shinran Shonin encourages us to say the Nembutsu in a Wasan,

"No less than people of True Entrusting,  
Practicers of doubt who cling to self-power should  
Awaken to the benevolence of Amida's great compassion  
And endeavor in saying the Nembutsu."

(*Koso Wasan* #66, C.W.S. page 414)



(5) We conclude with a Dharma-Talk and Dharma-Discussion, as interpretation or commentary on the teaching as all masters have done to explain the Nembutsu-Dharma.

May you all be happy, well and peaceful in the Nembutsu!  
"Namo-Amidabu"